More commanders *are requesting the services of the MQ-1 Predator — like this one taking off from Creech Air Force Base, Nev. — than any other aircraft flying in the war on terrorism. To keep up with the demand for its services, the Airmen at this base are training more aircrews, even as they continue flying combat support missions over Iraq and Afghanistan.*

High-flying HUNTERS

Ground commanders can't get enough of the Predator

by Louis A. Arana-Barradas
photos by Staff Sgt. Brian Ferguson

Flying his airplane, unseen and unheard, high above the rugged Afghan mountains, Lt. Col. Christopher Plamp felt a familiar adrenaline rush. The kind he gets in combat.

Far below him, insurgents were ambushing a coalition patrol and he could see them firing at the "friendlies." But the commander on the ground didn't know who was shooting or from where. So he had his joint terminal attack controller call for help in finding the enemy.

The unblinking television eye of the colonel's MQ-1 Predator watched events unfold. Close by, a special operations AC-130 gunship also circled, ready to jump into the fight. On the ground, the controller ran the show and kept up a constant chatter with the aircraft overhead.

"Then the enemy split into two groups," the colonel from Louisville, Ky., said.

No matter. With its sophisticated array of sensors, the Predator tracked them both. Then, with a green light from the JTAC, the colonel coordinated an attack with the gunship. The Predator marked one group with its laser so the gunship could find it.

"The AC-130 took one group and I took the other," the colonel said.

The second group headed for its camp, which took a long time to reach. Maybe the insurgents thought they escaped. Wrong. The Predator, which routinely flies 20- to 24-hour sorties, patiently tracked them. Once sure of his target, Colonel Plamp attacked.

"I shot them with a Hellfire (missile)," he said. The gunship also did its job. "We took care of both groups."

Flush with victory, the commander of the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron felt a great sense of accomplishment. But he didn't pull a Tom Cruise and snap his Predator into a victory roll.

"You can't do that with a Predator," he said of the aircraft he fondly describes as "a big glider with a snowmobile engine." Its top speed is only about 138 mph. Besides, Colonel Plamp was in his "cockpit" at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.

And though he flew his remote-control aircraft via a satellite data link and saw the action on a television screen, engaging the enemy that day was just as intense as when he did it up close and personal with his bomb-laden A-10 Thunderbolt II ground-attack fighter. He felt the same sense of urgency to make sure the Hellfire went where it was supposed to go.

"Being here and firing a Hellfire 7,000 miles away was just like

***Training Predator and Reaper** aircrews (left photo) is job one at Creech AFB, Nev. Instructors Staff Sgt. Brett Sauerland (left, back) helps Staff Sgt. Jesse Childers (left, bottom) learn the ins and outs of being a sensor operator. Next to them, Rob Cushing (center) instructs Maj. Toby Brallier on flight operations. Predator pilots and sensor operators use a host of computer screens (top photo) to keep track of the aircraft's systems and video feeds.*

being there," he said. "We're not playing a video game. We're engaged in the war."

The only difference: The colonel went home to his family that night.

Success = growth

The success of Colonel Plamp's mission, and many others like it, is why Predators are the busiest aircraft in the coalition's arsenal. In 2006, squadron aircrews flew more than 40,000 combat hours over Iraq and Afghanistan, more than any other Air Force unit. This year the number could reach 55,000 hours. And aircrews had a 95-percent Hellfire kill rate.

The numbers are impressive. But they will continue to rise, said Col. Chris Chambliss, commander of the 432nd Wing at Creech Air Force Base, Nev. The wing stood up May 1, 2007, to manage Predator and MQ-9 Reaper unmanned aircraft systems, and train aircrews to fly them.

Wing aircraft fly daily intelligence, reconnaissance and surveillance missions over Iraq and Afghanistan. A few years ago, they flew six sorties, or orbits, a day. Today that number is 12 daily combat air patrols. In two years, the figure will be 21 sorties, the colonel said.

What make unmanned aircraft such a hot commodity is the proven capabilities they give ground commanders, the former F-16 Fighting Falcon pilot said.

"The biggest is persistence. We call it the unblinking eye. We can put a Predator — or as we stand up the Reaper squadron, a Reaper — over a target for hours at a time," the colonel said. "And we can shoot video, real time, directly to a ground commander's laptop."

This allows commanders to change strategy during a battle. Or they can "see" what's behind a hill, around a corner or on a roof-

top. Predators can mark and direct other aircraft to a target, or take it out themselves. And the data they provide — which a host of sources can view and analyze — lets commanders re-direct troops or aircraft to attack time-critical targets that pop up.

That's why warfighters can't get enough of the Predator, Colonel Chambliss said.

"Commanders want more of it all the time," he said. And in a time when the massive spending to fund the war on terrorism is forcing the military to cut people, equipment, programs and missions, the unmanned aircraft business remains "a growth industry," he said.

Even as the wing ramps up, the demand for its services continues to grow. That will be more evident when its 42nd Attack Squadron goes operational. Those aircrews will fly the Predator's bigger, bomb- and missile-carrying, hunter-killer cousin, the Reaper. Its 3,000-pound bomb load will give commanders on the ground even more options on the battlefield.

To fly more missions, the wing must acquire more aircrews. That's its biggest problem, Colonel Chambliss said. But things are looking up. He said there's a line of people trying to get into the Predator and Reaper trade.

"Guard units that lost aircraft missions have stood up and said, 'We want to get into the unmanned aircraft business. Make us a part of what you're doing,'" Colonel Chambliss said.

As a result, Creech has become unmanned aircraft central. The small base, located in the desert 45 miles northwest of Las Vegas, has a total force and multinational flair. Air Force reservists; guardsmen from California, Nevada, North Dakota and Texas; contractors; and British military forces — integrated into the Air Force units — all train and fly from there. The 15th Reconnaissance Squadron will continue flying operational missions from Nellis until it can move to Creech.

"We couldn't do our mission without the Guard or Reserve — just flat couldn't do it," the wing commander from Overland Park, Kan., said.

***At Creech**, a 432nd Aircraft Maintenance Squadron Predator crew chief (top) launches a Predator for a training mission. A Predator pilot (above) guides his aircraft on a mission over Afghanistan, from a ground control station at Nellis Air Force Base, Nev.*

Training warfighters

To meet the demand for its services, the wing increased its training regimen for Predator pilots and sensor operators. The job is one the 11th Reconnaissance Squadron has been doing since 1995 and must continue to increase. The attack squadron is training Reaper aircrews as it develops a training program.

The training squadron has increased its output of combat-ready aircrews, said Lt. Col. Micah Morgan, the squadron's director of operations. A former B-1 Lancer pilot, the colonel from Bryan, Texas, has more than 1,500 combat support hours in the Predator. He said the squadron has undergone an amazing transformation. When he arrived at Creech in February 2005, instructors were training 40 aircrews a year. Today, the figure is up to 120 per year.

"And next year we'll train 160 crews. That's a more than 300 percent growth," he said.

But the squadron has no choice but boost training because the demand for Predator services has also grown by about 300 percent, Colonel Morgan said.

New students, pilots and sensor operators, go through three months of training, usually as a crew. It's not easy, especially for the enlisted sensor operators — most who arrive straight from intelligence school as imagery analysts. Students, even the pilots, know little about the aircraft when they arrive at Creech, the colonel said.

"But when they leave us, they're ready to pull the trigger in combat," Colonel Morgan said. One student got his chance on his first mission. "Within an hour, he had squeezed the trigger."

The sensor operator who guided Colonel Plamp's Hellfire to its

***The Reaper**, the Predator's larger, more-lethal cousin, is a new arrival at Creech AFB, Nev. It carries twice as many weapons as the Predator, including 500-pound bombs, like the one civilian contractors and former Airmen Mickal Futch (back) and Darryl France load on their Reaper.*

target in Afghanistan had only been on the job four days. Proof the training pays off immediately, he said.

Training instructors — total force, contractors and British Airman — put students through Predator 101. It takes more to fly a Predator than a traditional aircraft because the pilot is responsible for the aircraft, airspace and operation. In the "right seat," the sensor operator controls the camera and "the view the rest of the world sees," Colonel Morgan said. Coordination becomes critical, so crews share duties, like getting a Hellfire to a target or talking to ground controllers and other aircraft.

"It's a pretty intense course and we mold them for the job," the colonel said. "We must make sure they're trained right because they're going right into combat and lives are on the line."

That reality, and the promise of having a key role in the war, attracts many Airmen. So getting the people to fill the rising need for aircrews is getting easier. Before, many pilots couldn't see themselves flying a remote-control airplane. But the ever-increasing importance of the Predator mission is drawing pilots. So pilots who have flown virtually every aircraft in the Air Force fleet are now training at Creech.

"Flying Predators used to be a last-resort option," Predator student and former F-15 Eagle pilot Maj. Splitz Bermel said. "It was almost a joke to be a UAV pilot."

Not anymore, the major from Randolph, Neb., said. When he left his Eagle squadron, some of his fellow pilots questioned his move. But now some of those same pilots call him to ask about the program and what he thinks about the Predator and its mission.

"I tell them it's the place to be," the major said. "I'm definitely glad I chose this."

Airman 1st Class Brittany Moseley passed up medical school, and a year into her enlistment, now sits in the right seat next to Major Bermel. The imagery analyst had to learn everything about the aircraft, how it flies and the pilot's job. Pilots learn the sensor's job, too.

"The training we get is like a crash course in aviation," the Airman from Ripon, Calif., said. Once out of training, she won't be on the battlefield.

"But I'll play a direct role in what's going on in Afghanistan and Iraq," she said. "That's the best part, knowing I'll have an impact."

The first Reaper aircrews finished training in June. And while none of the aircraft have yet to see combat, the Airmen who fly them know their aircraft is already a force multiplier.

Capt. Wilson Lewis, former A-10 pilot, is one of the first Reaper pilots. He said the Reaper flies faster and higher, carries more weapons and has better overall capabilities than the Predator. It's the next step in the Air Force's evolution. That's one reason he switched to flying Reapers.

"The exciting part for me is yet to come," the captain from Sycamore, Ohio, said. "This [unmanned aircraft] is going to be the number one way to participate in any future conflicts."

Shaping the future

The future of the unmanned aircraft program is taking shape now, and each of the military services has its own program. But the Air Force wants to ensure unmanned aircraft don't just serve a particular service or mission. And Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley wants the Air Force to be the executive agent for the Defense Department's unmanned aircraft programs.

The general said the aim is to streamline the program, from acquisition to compatibility and from employment to airspace command and control. His aim is to ensure the aircraft make the joint force more capable.

But the Air Force is already doing that, and has an edge on the other services. It's the only service that remotely pilots unmanned aircraft. The other services use line-of-sight controls. And the Air Force has an extensive infrastructure of satellites, uplink and downlink locations, plus a host of other capabilities, to support the Predator and the Reaper.

***As the Reaper** works its way into the Air Force fleet, contractor — and Nevada guardsman — Bruce Ottenwess puts the aircraft through its paces. Mr. Ottenwess does a preflight inspection on a Reaper before a morning flight.*

Those capabilities are unique to the Air Force, Colonel Chambliss said.

"That's what sets us apart from the other folks in this business," the colonel said. "We think it's important that Airmen control the air because we understand it better. That's what we do. We're the experts in the organization and employment of airpower.

"Airmen in charge of airpower makes sense," he said.

Others agree. There are nations flying, or that want to fly, Predators. England wants to buy Predators for the Royal Air Force. France and other nations are asking about the program.

Italy has six of the aircraft and has flown them from Iraq since 2005. Before deploying to Iraq this year, the Italians went to Creech to learn what the Air Force already knows about flying over the country and how to integrate with the structure there.

"This is where people come to find out how we do this business," Colonel Plamp said.

British Flight Sgt. Paul is one of those people. The Predator sensor operator with the 15th Reconnaissance Squadron said the RAF wants unmanned aircraft because "we've got specialists we can bring into this fight."

So on the Creech flightline, other British servicemembers are learning about Predator and Reaper operations by working side by side with their American counterparts.

"We're here because this is where the real UAV capability is," the flight sergeant from Darlington, England, said. "The Air Force operates UAVs in Iraq and Afghanistan. So it's only logical we train with the experts."

Airmen at Creech say the Predators and Reapers are helping shape the future Air Force. Each day, they add new tactics, techniques and procedures to the way they do business. Many of those are the result of lessons learned while flying in the war on terrorism.

Col. Eric Mathewson, the 432nd Operations Group commander, said the unmanned aircraft program has come so far so fast it's constantly introducing new concepts of air and space power employment for the joint fight. A long-time F-15 Eagle pilot, he's been flying Predators since 2000. He said it's an exciting time to be in the unmanned aircraft business because at other units there is little latitude to make quick changes.

Not so at Predator central.

"We're rapidly developing and fielding new capability all the time," said Colonel Mathewson, of Paonia, Colo. "Where it would take five or 10 years for other platforms to gain a capability, it takes us six months to a year. We're going full throttle and everything we do is about the war."

Colonel Plamp looks forward to firing another Hellfire. And since he took command of his squadron more than a year ago, there has always been at least one Predator flying somewhere over Iraq or Afghanistan. So he knows he could get a chance to fire any day he flies. But he could get a mission like the one where Predators watched a house for almost 28 days.

The type of mission doesn't matter. Each one is critical. And the goal is to fly each one with the same fervor as one that results in a Hellfire shot, he said. Coalition forces depend on that.

"This is a very personal war," Colonel Plamp said. "It's about individuals. About the small numbers of people we look for. So, you need a specialized platform to accomplish the mission."

The Predator is doing that now. And the Reaper will soon join the fight.